

# Frank Loesser Himself

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(abridged version)

What would you say if I told you that no one has ever made a film dedicated to the composer of musicals *Guys & Dolls* and *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, or the man who wrote "*Heart and Soul*" or "*Baby It's Cold Outside*"?

First off, I bet you didn't know the same man wrote all of the above along with many more songs that remain old standbys, including "**Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition**".

After seven years of exhaustive work and research, Producer/Director Walter Gottlieb has delivered *Heart & Soul: The Life and Music of Frank Loesser*, a comprehensive documentary about the composer and lyricist currently airing on PBS stations nationwide.

Other notices I read about the doc before seeing it criticize an assertion I don't think is in there: that the filmmakers portray Frank as some sort of undiscovered talent. I think what they're going for is that Frank Loesser touched musical pop culture in many more ways than many people, even his fans, have imagined.

The doc itself is primarily composed of interviews with everyone who he touched or touched him: cast members of his Broadway shows (Matthew Broderick and Charles Nelson Reilly among others), both of his wives, and his children, along with many, many more. The anecdotes are plentiful, so much so that their original cut came in just shy of three hours.

Loesser was never the easiest man to work with, and wasn't always pleasant, but his work lives on indelibly not only in the frequent productions of his shows by regional, community and school theatres, but in the countless up-and-coming artistes his work has inspired. One of the most prominent (and probably surprising to some) among them, is *Wicked* composer Stephen Schwartz.

**To hear the librettists of *Singin in the Rain* (Comden & Green) and co-composer/lyricist of *The Pajama Game* (Richard Adler) talk about his mentoring them in the same 90 minutes as the guy who composed uber-budgeted, new-school *Wicked* going on about how crucially influential Loesser was is fascinating in itself.**

A few favorites include one story about Frank **slapping the taste out of a principal actress's mouth** still make me chuckle, thinking about how that among other encounters with talent would have spurned copious lawsuits had they happened a few decades later. Charles Nelson Reilly's story about his schizophrenic audition for *How to Succeed* is bizarre but completely believable. Based on what I saw in *The Life of Reilly* at last year's South by Southwest, I'm sure Charles gave them about 6 hours of material to cut from (all of which would have been useable, more than likely).

The frank (no pun intended) discussion of Loesser's personal life is a little sugarcoated, as one would expect, coming from the mouths of his wife and children, but none of his significant skeletons are completely ignored.

Speaking of anger...for as long as I can remember, I've personally wondered what kind of relationship Loesser had with Brando, both of them known for being demanding and difficult, and especially mercurial. Surprisingly, they evidently got along great, Loesser coaching Brando as a singer the whole way through.

This brings me to the elephant on Loesser's resume: *Guys & Dolls*.

Working as a theatre actor, I lose count of how many times I've heard "oh, not *another* production of *Guys & Dolls*" or something to that effect.

I admit a preference of Sondheim and Jason Robert Brown to Disney's Broadway, but I also admit an equal love for *Guys & Dolls* that makes me shake my head when someone groans the above.

The thing is, it's still a good (great, to me) show. It's full of memorable characters and beautiful songs that make it worth pulling out the movie every once in a while (and I stand by the movie, regardless of what people say of Brando) or going and seeing a solid live production.

Though pulled from the Age of Anti-Feminism...ahem, The Golden Age...it features assertive female leads that don't fall prey to what we see in musicals like *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, where the Weak-Willed Woman stereotype is alive and submissive. The brainless waifs and "dancing girls" along with other un-feminized types you find in other shows from the same era are indeed found here and elsewhere in Loesser's work, but the way he writes lyrics for them is something I'm not sure Broadway "got" until his shows were revived. The women don't just have a couple of lovelorn ballads and duets to look pretty singing, they have some upbeat stuff with which to assert themselves.

Well, except for the original act II opener for *How to Succeed*, "Cinderella Darling"...*don't Cinderella Darling, don't turn down the Prince...* got replaced with a female version of the titular song in the revival...

...but I digress.

Watching this documentary brought back all sorts of memories for me, as I'm sure it would for many fans of musical theatre. I've performed in a production of *H2\$*, and the first musical I ever saw live was a local production of *Guys & Dolls* back in Texas. I sang "Heart & Soul" for a choral competition in middle school, and Ashley and I both have a deep affection for "Baby It's Cold Outside". I have to admit bias going in because I liked what I knew about him. The documentary itself, however, opens up a breadth of knowledge I would never have come across, short of doing an extremely thorough job researching him myself.

Clips from the first full production of *Senor Discretion Himself* and the 50th Anniversary of *Guys & Dolls* accompany the interviews and few instances of "re-enactment" and completes a very intricate picture of the legacy of a great artist. Anyone teaching Music Theatre History or a comparable subject would do well to show this to their class, as they would certainly learn more seeing this before or after *Guys & Dolls* than they would seeing the movie by itself and listening (sleeping or skipping) through a lecture.

You can snag a copy of the DVD [on their website](#). The disc features some excellent interview material that was understandably cut for time. All of the additional footage is worth a look, and the commentary is informative on how much work it really takes to complete a documentary made for public TV (did I mention it took 7 years?). Like I said, anybody teaching related material owes it to their students (whatever the age) to show this.

It was especially touching to see some of the last interviews given by participants like Cy Feurer and Betty Comden, which I'd almost forgotten noticing until Walter Gottlieb (the director) brought it up on the comment track. Gottlieb also laments the struggle to find decent elements on some of the older films that they used clips from (they eventually did), and reveals that a **Where's Charley? DVD is finally on the way sometime soon**, which is good news indeed. Film preservation is a good thing, folks. Buy catalog titles like this instead of the [latest straight-to-DVD aberration](#).

Give it a look if it's on your local station, and if you're in the mood to make some station programmers' heads explode, bug them to put it on the air. If Topeka gets to see it, so should you.

*No offense to Topeka, my mother's from Kansas, and it's a lovely state.*